

VZCZCXYZ0021
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHRH #0093/01 0191207
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 191207Z JAN 10
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2335
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L RIYADH 000093

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/17/2015
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [IR](#) [SA](#)
SUBJECT: SAUDI-IRANIAN TENSIONS EVIDENT IN
COUNTER-ACCUSATIONS OVER YEMEN, PILGRIMAGES AND ISLAMIC
GAMES

REF: A. 09 RIYADH 1507
[1](#)B. 09 RIYADH 1547

Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith for
reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

SUMMARY:

[1](#)1. (C) Following a relatively quiet Hajj season, Saudi-Iranian tensions are once again on display. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Saudi FM Saud Al-Faisal traded barbs, with Ahmadinejad criticizing the SAG's role in the Houthi conflict and FM Saud countering that Iran was the one intervening in Yemeni affairs. Meanwhile, the Iranian Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization temporarily prohibited Iranian pilgrims from travelling to Mecca and Medina for Umrah, but insisted the ban was for religious, not political, reasons. On January 18, organizers of the Islamic Solidarity Games announced that this year's event had been canceled, following a dispute between this year's host nation, Iran, and its Gulf neighbors over whether their shared body of water was the "Persian" or "Arabian" Gulf. These events -though likely unrelated- indicate Saudi-Iranian tensions continue to simmer. End Summary.

AHMADINEJAD: SAUDI WEAPONS SHOULD BE USED AGAINST ISRAEL

[1](#)2. (U) Speaking to press while touring the Iranian provinces on January 13, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blamed the KSA for acting improperly in defense of its southern border. "We were expecting Saudi Arabian officials to act like a mentor and make peace between brothers," Ahmadinejad said, "not to enter the war and use bombs and machine guns against Muslims." A better use of the SAG forces would be against Israel and in defense of Gaza, he added. "If only a small part of the weapons that Saudi Arabia used were in defense of Gaza...there would be no sign of the Zionist regime in the region." Concluding his remarks, Ahmadinejad said he hoped the Yemenis would "sit down and talk and negotiate the problems."

PRINCE SAUD: IT'S NOT US, IT,S YOU

[1](#)3. (U) Reacting to Ahmadinejad's statement, FM Saud Al-Faisal told the press on January 14 that the Iranian leader's accusations only proved that Tehran was intervening in Yemen's internal affairs. The SAG supports the Yemeni government and Yemen's unity, FM Saud said, and does not get involved in other countries' internal matters.

PILGRIMAGE ON HOLD

¶4. (U) On January 17, Ali Layali, head of the Iranian Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization told Fars News Agency that Iranian pilgrims would be temporarily prohibited from performing the Umrah (the minor or lesser pilgrimage), noting that the suspension was due to actions carried out by the Saudi Commission for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) against Shia pilgrims. "Due to the appalling behavior of the Saudi agents during the last Hajj and Umrah, we decided to have talks with the Saudis over the Umrah," explained Layali. Until the negotiations with the Saudi Ministry of the Hajj were settled, no Iranians would be allowed to travel to Mecca or Medina to perform the holy rite.

¶5. (U) Abdullah Nassiri, Head of Public Relations for the Iranian Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, said in an interview with Agence France Press that Shia pilgrims had been rudely confronted by the CPVPV while praying at the holy mosque in Mecca. "Since we are Shia, we have different rituals," Nassiri explained, "we want this (harassment) to be corrected and stopped. Our move is not political, it is religious."

ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY GAMES CANCELLED

¶6. (U) On January 18, organizers of the Islamic Solidarity Games, a semi regular sporting event held to strengthen ties among OIC member nations, announced that the Games had been canceled after a dispute over the name of the waterway

dividing Iran from the Arabian Peninsula. The games were originally scheduled to be held in Tehran in October 2009, but were postponed until the spring of 2010 with the hopes that a compromise could be reached. Iranian officials put the words "Persian Gulf" on awards and pamphlets to be handed out to athletes, angering SAG and other Arabian Peninsula nations who believe the waterway should be called the "Arabian Gulf." (NOTE: The dispute over the "correct" name of the Gulf dates back to at least the 1960's. Iran insists that the proper historical name is the Persian Gulf and even celebrates an annual National Persian Gulf Day on April 29. End Note.)

COMMENT:

¶7. (C) Ahmadinejad's comments are not out of character, and echo similar provocations made by Iranian leaders in November, 2009 (reftel A). The Saudis wisely chose to ignore the previous statements, lest they elevate the Houthi incursion into a larger regional or sectarian conflict (reftel B). While FM Saud's comments this time around simply repeat the SAG's party line, that he made them in response to Ahmadinejad's comments to a domestic audience suggests the Saudis are growing increasingly irritated with Iran's public attacks.

¶8. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Iranian authorities have temporarily suspended religious pilgrimages for security or political reasons in the past. For example, they prohibited Iranian pilgrims from visiting Najaf twice during 2009 due to security concerns. The timing of the Iranian Umrah suspension, together with other events in the region, suggests that political motivations could be at play. However, the complaints listed by Shia pilgrims are quite legitimate. Official policy notwithstanding, many Saudi Sunnis continue to believe Shia rituals are inconsistent with "proper" Islam. Some Saudi clerics openly condemn Shia practices, and it is no surprise to hear that Shia pilgrims may have been harassed for worshiping in an "incorrect" manner. Harassment of Shia worshipers at Islam's holiest sites is an issue that, left unresolved, could help fuel the

kind of larger Sunni-Shia conflict the Saudi leadership is
keen to avoid. End comment.
SMITH